

# LEARNING TO LIVE WITH EVIL

*by*

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mately be dealt with under one heading is that Satan and his fallen angels are not united with our human race. Our fall does not affect them, and our salvation does not include theirs. God has chosen to keep the problem of Satan's rebellion separate.

We also need to keep demonic evil separate from human evil because of its great power and potential for harming us. The demonic realm derives part of its power from its incalculability. We have little solid knowledge of Satan and cannot map out a strategy against him in the same way that we can develop a strategy to defend ourselves against the threat posed by sinful human beings. The best we can do is to pray daily: "Deliver us from the evil one." In Christ there is protection from Satan.

The reality and threat of Satan should never be minimized. Yet there is very little we are able to say about him theologically. God willed the possibility of sin in Satan's case as well, and we must believe that He uses even Satan's wickedness to achieve His grand design.

A final word of caution about demonic evil is in order: we must avoid any preoccupation with it, lest we fall under its sway. We know Satan is busy as a tempter, but we may not transfer responsibility for our sins and shortcomings to the demons. The devil may influence and even injure us, but he has not been given power over us. Those who have heard the Word need not be deceived by Satan's lies.

## VI

At various points I have indicated that it is not adequate to speak of sin and evil essentially in terms of privation, despite the fact that such a view has won considerable acceptance in Christian circles, both Catholic and Protestant. Although there is indeed a sense in which the fall into sin represents a loss, we must also recognize evil as a great power in this world, a power that will eventually be judged and destroyed.

What the privation view of evil wishes to stress, presumably, is that sin is not something created by God. Since there is no other creator, the logical conclusion is that sin is uncreated. The intention behind this line of argument is laudable, yet it allows for a certain misconception.

Religion, our covenant relationship with God, is not a part of

life but embraces all of life. Sin, as a reversal or a turning away from God, affects all of life as well. If life is religion, that is, service of God and fellowship with God on the believer's part, we may say that life is sin for those who live in rebellion against God.

Religion is not a mere part of life, only one among other parts that remain unaffected by the fall into sin. Our fall, our depraved (sinful) state, is *total*. Hence our renewal is total as well.

One of the dangers of the deprivation theory of sin and evil, then, is that it suggests that sin and the service of God are not total but *partial*. Sinfulness on man's part means that some aspect of life is missing or absent, while religion is taken to be an aspect of life beyond the "natural" aspects which believers and unbelievers have in common. In short, the Calvinistic doctrine of total (pervasive) depravity does not leave room for the concept of sin as deprivation.

## VII

Sin and evil do not have an origin or cause in the strict sense. God created the possibility of sin but did not actually bring it into being. We can point to a beginning of sin in the rebellion and disobedience first of the angels and then of man, but this is not yet to indicate a cause.

Sin is linked to our freedom. We may generalize about the free acts of human beings, but we can never really explain them. Why did Adam sin instead of continuing in the path of obedience? We can give no explanation. We can perhaps "understand," and we may have to admit that we might well have done the same thing in his place, but his free act has no ground outside itself. Adam and Eve sinned — that's all we can really say.

## VIII

Much modern thinking does not respect freedom but is convinced that any being that is both good and free will follow a path that is predictable in principle. Therefore various thinkers have sought to determine what God would have had to do if He were truly both good and free. We should note that a curious reversal of perspective takes place here: man's happiness becomes God's end.

The Calvinist tradition has always made much of God's free-

dom. It has spoken of that freedom as God's "sovereignty." That sovereignty is not just power; it is also God's good pleasure, which man may not question. Scripture places God's glory at the center, and this center has become the starting point in Calvinist reflection. God's glory is the ultimate purpose of all His deeds of creation and redemption.

The Calvinist starting point has some definite consequences for the question of sin and evil in human life. Charles Hodge writes:

The glory of God being the greatest end of all things, we are not obliged to assume that this is the best possible world for the production of happiness, or even for securing the greatest degree of holiness among rational creatures. It is wisely adapted for the end for which it was designed, namely, the manifestation of the manifold perfections of God. That God, in revealing Himself, does promote the highest good of His creatures, consistent with the promotion of His own glory, may be admitted. But to reverse this order, to make the good of the creature the highest end, is to pervert and subvert the whole scheme; it is to put the means for the end, to subordinate God to the universe, the Infinite to the finite.<sup>16</sup>

Hodge's perspective is not widely accepted today; the ethical theory known as utilitarianism has long been pushing it aside. Utilitarianism asserts that human beings must always choose the course of action that will bring as much happiness to as many people as possible. This general rule becomes a norm or standard for defining goodness and righteousness.

John Calvin, proceeding from the sovereignty of God, refused to allow any human conception of goodness or justice to define God's nature or character. Thus Calvin was well aware of the issue raised in our time by John Hick, who argues that the Biblical account of God's dealings with man cannot be accepted as it stands because it presents God as pursuing a policy which would be branded unjust by most people today (see p. 47 above). Calvin rejects this line of argument out of hand and claims that it works just the other way around: it is *God* who defines goodness and righteousness:

Foolish men contend with God in many ways, as though they held him liable to their accusations. . . . If thoughts of this sort ever occur to pious men, they will be sufficiently armed to break their force even by the one consideration that it is very wicked merely to investigate the causes of God's will. For his will is, and rightly ought to be, the

cause of all things that are. . . . For God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found.<sup>17</sup>

Calvin's approach to this central issue is flatly rejected by various thinkers who insist on imposing human ethical sentiments on God. The result, of course, is not just a rejection of Calvin but a rejection of the Scriptural picture of God. George C. Brooks, for example, argues that the God of Easter, the God who sacrifices His own Son, has "no finer instincts than a primitive man." He continues: "Easter, it seems to me, asks us to worship a God Whose moral sense is less than our own. I think it is moral blindness when Christian worshipers are unable to see this." Brooks concludes: "Easter theology is, in short, self-defeating. It deadens our moral nature and leads us to accept any picture of God if only it proves that Jesus' death and resurrection guarantees us life after death and grace from sin."<sup>18</sup>

John Hick thinks along similar lines. In orthodox Christian theology, Christ's death on the cross is viewed as a necessary step in the redemption of sinners. Yet Hick speaks of it as "a case of utterly unjust suffering" and as "an evil than which no greater can be conceived."<sup>19</sup> To him it is inconceivable that Christ's agony could be part of God's plan for punishing sin and working redemption.

Like many others, Hick brings "moral" arguments against God's dealings with mankind as those dealings are traditionally understood: ". . . the policy of punishing the whole succeeding human race for the sin of the first pair is, by the best human moral standards, unjust. . . ." Hick speaks of God as "the Lord of a chosen in-group whom He loves, who are surrounded by an alien out-group, whom He hates."<sup>20</sup>

In such thinkers we see how ethical considerations become uppermost: sentiment triumphs over justice. Man is placed in the center, and all of theology (including the conception of God) is made subordinate to *man's* happiness (utilitarianism). I have not yet read a suggestion to the effect that if God is truly good and free, He is obliged to create an infinite number of human beings on whom to shower His grace, but such a demand would appear

to be in order once we begin using human moral standards to define God.

At bottom, of course, the complaint is not that God does not do as much good as He might; the real complaint is that He chooses to punish sinners. Christ's death on the cross makes sense only in the light of God's determination not to let sin go unpunished.

Why this opposition to the idea of punishment? The opposition seems strange if one begins with the notion of sin as a rebellion against God through which natural evil comes into the world. On the other hand, if natural evil is made primary and sin is viewed as man's inescapable finitude, punishment does indeed appear to be inappropriate. If man can never overcome his finitude and sinfulness (despite the "growth" he may achieve), it does not seem right that he should be punished for it. In short, if natural evil is made the most basic type of evil, one is likely to wind up with John Hick's "God of love," who saves all men.

## IX

The theological position that all men must be — and will be — saved is known as universalism. Frank Hugh Foster regarded universalism to be essentially "an English distortion of Calvinism." The opponents of Calvinism in New England, according to Foster, "ethicized theology."<sup>21</sup> Herbert Wallace Schneider sums up the great transformation in New England as follows: "... Puritan benevolence or love had found its object in the excellence and glory of God; now benevolence itself was deified."<sup>22</sup> The idea of God was recast as the idea of goodness (see p. 53 above).

Abraham Kuyper, whose own background was liberal theology, was intimately acquainted with the "ethicizing" tendency, which he associated with pantheism and its destruction of the ontological distinction between Creator and creature (see pp. 55–56 above). He writes that it is an "iron law" of pantheism that "the boundary between religious and ethical life is eliminated and that all religious phenomena are turned into *ethical phenomena*."<sup>23</sup>

To reflect on the nature of evil is at the same time to reflect on the ultimate ground of goodness. If goodness is rooted in God, the possibility of evil must also be rooted in God. But if goodness is rooted in man, the very possibility of evil becomes elusive.

Then the suggestion that evil is nothing, non-being, illusion becomes attractive.

The tendency to put man at the center of all thinking is deeply rooted in the human heart. Arthur Custance refers to this tendency when he writes that human beings are Arminians (and Pelagians) at heart. He argues that in the final analysis, the alternative to the theology of grace found in Augustine and Calvin is a "Christianized humanism."<sup>24</sup>

Arminianism (i.e., the doctrine that Christ died for all men, although not all men are saved) and universalism (i.e., the doctrine that all men are saved) are both reactions against Calvinism; they are two steps on the road to be followed when God's sovereignty is rejected. The doctrine of the Trinity next becomes superfluous — Unitarianism. And once Unitarianism is embraced, it is but a short step to an unabashed Humanism with man self-consciously at the center. These steps are illustrated in the development of Calvinist theology in New England (see Chapter 15 below).

But such an outlook leaves man with no ultimately satisfying response in the face of the problem of evil. Evil cannot be denied, and man cannot overcome it unaided. Only the sovereign God revealed in the Bible is able to vanquish evil — and He will do so. In the meantime we must learn to live with evil.

ing; Christ's sacrifice was sufficient to meet the conditions for our redemption. But we may — and should — proclaim that God "knows" our suffering and does not hide His face from His people when they are afflicted and cry out to Him in prayer.

The suffering of Jesus can be an inspiration to us. At the same time, it reminds us of the centrality of the mystery of evil. What is mysterious is not just the existence of evil but the manner in which God combats evil and uses evil to effect our redemption. McKenzie comments as follows on the suffering of Christ:

In his sufferings we discern the gospel theme that suffering is a part of the reign of sin and death; it is evil, not good, and the heart of the mystery of our redemption is that we are saved through something which is involved with sin and death. The gospel does not require us to praise suffering or to affirm that it has a goodness which it does not have. Suffering is a part of the human condition, that condition which in biblical language is called a curse.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus tells us that the Son of man *must* suffer (Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22). Once man made that horrible choice for sin and rebellion, evil could not be purged from God's creation without great suffering. When we behold the suffering of Christ and the anguish of our fellow human beings as they face disease and death, we cry out: "How long? Hasn't the agony gone on long enough?" Only God knows the answer.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# CONFLICT AND SPECTACLE

### I

WE have seen that some forms of evil draw the attention of people even though they would be better advised to stay away from them (i.e., pornography and violence), while some other forms of evil are repulsive, with the result that people prefer to avert their eyes and avoid involvement (i.e., misery and suffering). Yet there is much that falls between these two categories. One could point to many spectacles and forms of conflict that have attracted widespread attention, even if there were indeed people who refused to become interested.

Showmen know that people love to see something new and out of the ordinary. One of the most successful acts in entertainment history was a nineteenth-century midget known as General Tom Thumb, who made appearances in North America and Europe under the sponsorship of P. T. Barnum. The midget was in no way misshapen or deformed: the only unusual thing about him was that he stood a mere twenty-five inches.

Barnum and his competitors in the entertainment business had more than midgets on display. Another of Barnum's successes was a pair of men who went through life anatomically joined — the original "Siamese twins," named Chang and Eng. Irving Wallace tells us how they were joined:

From birth, they were united by a thick, fleshy ligament covered with skin, like a four-inch arm, connecting their lower chests. At first, this band held them face to face, but as they grew, it stretched to five and a half inches, allowing them to stand and move sideways. The joint was sensitive but strong. If it was touched at the middle, both boys felt the sensation. Yet so sturdy was it that if one of the Twins

happened to trip and lose his balance, the ligament held him dangling but firm.<sup>1</sup>

People paid good money to get a look at these unfortunates. And there are many more such examples that could be given, for it appears that there is no sight so hideous that people will not pay to see it. John Merrick, the grotesquely deformed "Elephant Man," also spent part of his life being displayed to others. More recently a stage play and a movie have chronicled his life.

In our time such human beings are rarely put on display. But other unusual people — greatly overweight, or with partial limbs, or discolored skin, or some other malady — are to be encountered in our streets. Well-mannered adults look the other way, while children stare and point. Clearly we do not know what to make of "freaks." Some people wish to abolish the term, but the people we apply it to remain what they are — different, and somehow not normal.<sup>2</sup>

## II

Other spectacles in history, unlike human "spectacles" beyond human cure, have been entirely within man's power to eliminate. Their persistence was due solely to human perversity. The early mental hospitals fall into this category. Actually, they were not hospitals in any serious sense at all: they served only as warehouses for mentally and emotionally disturbed people who did not or could not function normally in society. Supposedly normal people would stroll through such institutions from time to time to gawk and laugh at the insane.

Such spectacles are no longer tolerated in our society, but others, involving animals, are. Lions and tigers are conditioned to perform on command to entertain us. Full-grown bears — magnificent, powerful animals — are decked out in dresses and straw hats and made to look comical as they clutch musical instruments. In many parts of the world, sad to say, fights to the death are still staged between combative animals or birds.

The most famous of the violent, bloody spectacles took place in the Roman amphitheaters. The gruesome battles and rending of flesh even pitted animals against human beings.<sup>3</sup> The cruelty and barbarism of the Romans who organized such entertainment is hard to understand, but similar impulses manifest themselves in human behavior today.

## III

It would be easy to conclude that these spectacles, in which people have taken a malicious delight over the ages, are thoroughly reprehensible and have no legitimate place in human life. One is tempted to draw such a conclusion, and yet to do so is perhaps too simple. The human love of spectacles involves more than mere malicious glee. Our love of spectacles is also a factor, for example, in the complex phenomenon of warfare.

J. Glenn Gray, in his book on war, speaks of "the lust of the eye" in connection with battle and of the "secret attraction" of warfare. He tells us that many soldiers take delight in battle as a spectacle. The splendor of the spectacle may be understood — in part, at least — in aesthetic terms:

Some scenes of battle, much like storms over the ocean or sunsets on the desert or the night sky seen through a telescope, are able to overawe the single individual and hold him in a spell. He is lost in their majesty. His ego temporarily deserts him, and he is absorbed into what he sees. An awareness of power that far surpasses his limited imagination transports him into a state of mind unknown in his everyday experiences. Fleeting as these rapt moments may be, they are, for the majority of men, an escape from themselves that is very different from the escapes induced by sexual love or alcohol. This raptness is a joining and not a losing, a deprivation of self in exchange for a union with objects that were hitherto foreign. Yes, the chief aesthetic appeal of war surely lies in this feeling of the sublime, to which we, children of nature, are directed whether we desire it or not. Astonishment and wonder and awe appear to be part of our deepest being, and war offers them an exercise field par excellence.<sup>4</sup>

Although Gray is a philosopher who brings in academic language here, he speaks against the background of his own experience in World War II. He describes how an attack on the French Riviera in which he himself was to participate made a deep impression on him:

When I could forget the havoc and terror that was being created by those shells and bombs among the half-awake inhabitants of the villages, the scene was beyond all question magnificent. I found it easily possible, indeed a temptation hard to resist, to gaze upon the scene spellbound, completely absorbed, indifferent to what the immediate future might bring. Others appeared to manifest a similar intense concentration on the spectacle.<sup>5</sup>

Other soldiers who took part in World War II report similar

reactions. From the published diary of a German soldier we learn that the thrill of the chase and the sight of the tanks could be not just frightening but enchanting:

You simply cannot imagine . . . what the concentrated fire of a reinforced motor battalion means; you think the world's at an end. The thunder and roar of the guns, the shots bursting as they land, the trails of tracers from the flak, the burning houses in the town, increased by the tracer shells of our artillery. It's frightful — and beautiful.

After passing through the first village, we spread out over the fields. Beforehand we are assigned some tanks, and now we've spread out the tanks and other vehicles in a broad formation over the fields and are charging into the fleeing Russians. The order of the Companies and other units has got a bit mixed up in the intoxication of this fabulous chase, but it's wonderful to watch the vehicles tearing ahead. There ought to be some newsreel men here; there would be incomparable picture material! Tanks and armoured cars, the men sitting on them, encrusted with a thick coating of dirt, heady with the excitement of the attack — haystacks set on fire by our tank cannons, running Russians, hiding, surrendering! It's a marvellous sight!<sup>6</sup>

The weapons of war are "engines of destruction," like the lobster in Theodore Dreiser's novel (see p. 13 above). The mobilization and movement of these engines of destruction can itself be an epic, unforgettable sight. Some memorable prose has been written to describe armies and armadas massing for battle. I think of the classic description of the invasion forces which the Allies assembled to throw against Hitler's Europe on D day, 1944:

For now back in the Channel, plowing through the choppy gray waters, a phalanx of ships bore down on Hitler's Europe — the might and fury of the free world unleashed at last. They came, rank after relentless rank, ten lanes wide, twenty miles across, five thousand ships of every description. There were fast new attack transports, slow rust-scarred freighters, small ocean liners, Channel steamers, hospital ships, weather-beaten tankers, coasters and swarms of fussing tugs. There were endless columns of shallow-draft landing ships — great wallowing vessels, some of them almost 350 feet long. Many of these and the other heavier transports carried smaller landing craft for the actual beach assault — more than 1,500 of them. Ahead of the convoys were processions of mine sweepers, Coast Guard cutters, buoy-layers and motor launches. Barrage balloons flew above the ships. Squadrons of fighter planes weaved below the clouds. And surrounding this fantastic cavalcade of ships packed with men, guns, tanks, motor vehicles

supplies, and excluding small naval vessels, was a formidable array of 702 warships.<sup>7</sup>

#### IV

There are many who would defend this depiction of the Allied invasion force on both moral and literary grounds, arguing that it is not offensive or corrupting. Stories about armies and battles have always had a certain appeal. Although today we tend to turn away from warfare in horror and disgust, we would do well to reflect on the reason for its popularity. It seems to me that there are no simple answers available for the questions that arise here. Is it entirely to be regretted that historical books and movies dealing with savage, intense conflicts represent a favorite form of entertainment?

One of the most popular ways to entertain people is to present a story — whether history or fiction. And if a story is truly to be a story, it must have conflict, a clash of some sort between opposing forces, or perhaps opposing tendencies within a single person. Literary "conflict" is the struggle that grows out of the interplay of the two opposing forces in the plot of a story. It is conflict that lends interest and suspense to a story.<sup>8</sup>

An interest in the conflict that is essential to a story, then, should not automatically be ruled out of bounds. Neither should an interest in degeneration, whether in people or situations or entire societies. Degeneration often provides the setting for a story. One of the reasons for the appeal of the novels of Charles Dickens, for example, is the horrifying setting he chose for some of them. Dickens displayed the seamy side of Victorian England and won automatic sympathy for his characters by pitting them against a desperate environment. Kellow Chesney describes the slums of Dickens's London as follows:

Hideous slums, some of them acres wide, some no more than crannies of obscure misery, make up a substantial part of the metropolis. Because they are so densely occupied they are profitable, and seldom cleared away except to make way for new thoroughfares and frontages. In big, once handsome houses, thirty or more people of all ages may inhabit a single room, squatting, sleeping, copulating on the straw-filled billets or mounds of verminous rags that are the only furniture. There are cellar-homes, dark, foetid and damp with sewage,



where women keep watch for the rats that gnaw their infants' faces and fingers.<sup>9</sup>

The interest many people take in such settings is not necessarily an expression of baser elements in their makeup. Sympathy plays a role here, since we like to see people succeed in the face of the forces arrayed against them. A rags-to-riches story always has appeal.

## V

We cannot, then, rule out as wrong all interest in conflict and spectacles. Some of it is well-motivated. Still, much of it speaks poorly of us and should be discouraged.

Spelling out rules and guidelines is not easy. Even the rationale for urging people to avoid gawking at freaks and attending tasteless exhibitions is hard to formulate. It seems to me that some of the considerations we might apply are related to the arguments generally adduced against cruelty to animals.

There are laws that protect certain types of animals from certain types of mistreatment. For the most part, however, the law leaves us free to deal with nonhuman creatures (especially the smaller ones) as we please. Children still pull legs off spiders and burn grasshoppers.

I don't believe we should pass *laws* against every conceivable form of mischief, although such infliction of pain should clearly be discouraged by parents and teachers. Just how much pain is actually caused in such creatures is hard to say; it is often argued that the fish does not suffer from the hook in its mouth when the fisherman reels it in. But whether fish and insects and other small creatures suffer or not, the willingness to treat even spiders and grasshoppers in an inhumane manner testifies to an inadequate or underdeveloped sense of solidarity with all nature and responsibility for nature. In the final analysis, we must avoid inflicting needless pain or degradation on animals and insects out of respect for ourselves as sensitive and compassionate persons bearing the image of a merciful God.

The "common judgment" that affects the natural world and the animals in the form of natural evil is the result of our sin. James Orr reminds us that "nature is a sufferer with man on account of sin" and speaks of "a solidarity between man and the

outward world, both in his Fall and his Redemption."<sup>10</sup> We must always bear this solidarity with nature in mind and do our best to ensure that, although the creatures of God inevitably suffer on our account, they are not subjected to any needless pain.

When we see deformed human beings (e.g., the former Thalidomide babies, now grown into adults), similar considerations apply. The natural evil that strikes them so severely could just as well have struck anyone else. All human beings are equally guilty by virtue of mankind's original sin. Yet certain unfortunates bear the mark of the curse afflicting the earth more than others.

There is no place for self-satisfaction on the part of those who are not deformed; rather, sympathy and a willingness to help share the burden are called for. This we see fittingly manifested in the recent measures undertaken to make public buildings accessible and usable for handicapped people in wheelchairs. Never may we make a spectacle of diseased or deformed people, for to do so is to increase their burden and to demean ourselves.

## VI

The question of spectacles that do not involve deformities raises another set of considerations. Those who are drawn to spectacles involving great destruction may be worshipping raw power. The mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb is an awesome sight, but we must not fall down in worship before the bomb's power to level and destroy everything in its path. War movies that enhance their popularity with spectacular bombing scenes can lead to the formation of a militaristic attitude, one in which it is believed that conflicts or disputes between people are best resolved through violence. The spirit of Lamech must not be allowed to take root in our hearts.

Some spectacles may display a power from an even more dangerous source — Satan. For centuries there have been people who were fascinated by the prospect of contact with the supernatural. Extravagant claims have been made by so-called mediums and witches. It may well be that most of those claims are utter nonsense; all the same, we should steer clear of any spectacle or form of entertainment that promises to reveal Satan and his power.

Satan is essentially foreign to our experience, and therefore his doings are incalculable. Since the Bible ascribes considerable power

to him, we ought to give him a wide berth. The ultimate cosmic confrontation in the battle between good and evil involves Satan and Christ — not Satan and some zealous Christian who believes he can fight his way to sainthood.

## VII

A type of spectacle that has not been touched on yet is competition. Competitive sports and activities are open to much abuse; the "winning is the only thing" philosophy is much with us. Naturally, we must stress that it is very important how one plays the game. Still, the object of the game is to win, and there is nothing inherently wrong with winning.

Any competitive activity involves conflict and tension, whether one competes against an opponent in chess or against one's own previous record in the high jump. This conflict and tension also makes such activities of interest to other people. There need be nothing unhealthy or wrong with competitive activities as forms of entertainment.

In some Christian circles there is a tendency to overreact against the excesses and abuses we find in professional and collegiate athletics. The distortions that are undoubtedly present should not lead us to turn sports like baseball and football into something that they are not. To play catch may be fun and good exercise as well, but there is much more than playing catch involved in baseball and football. The object is to score runs or touchdowns.

We should not forget that the language of exertion and training and strenuous competition is to be found in Scripture. Paul compares the believer to a dedicated athlete: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it" (I Corinthians 9:24).

The Christian life is a race, a conflict, a struggle. To make it to the goal, we must do battle with the forces of evil. That battle, when properly waged, can even be a spectacle that inspires others to fight on to the finish.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# IMAGINATION AND DEPICTION

### I

ONE of the aims of education is to develop the power of imagination. We are sometimes told that television, which places an endless stream of concrete images before children, deprives them of the need to use their imagination and thereby does them a disservice. Children need to hear stories told or to read them in books so that they will have to imagine what the monsters and heroes look like.

Monsters and heroes may loom large in the make-believe world of the child, but they are also becoming of interest to *adults* in our time. The entertainment industry feeds us a steady diet of monsters and catastrophes. It is also rediscovering the appeal of heroes — after many decades in which the hero seemed irrelevant or obsolete in art.

The emphasis on the heroic and its significance was a major theme in the nineteenth century — especially in the writings of Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle spoke of "hero worship" and declared: "We all love great men: love, venerate and bow down submissively before great men; nay, can we honestly bow down to anything else?" For Carlyle the hero is not just *morally* elevating but has a *religious* significance for us: "Hero-worship, heartfelt prostrate admiration, submission, burning, boundless, for a noblest godlike form of man — is not that the germ of Christianity itself?"<sup>1</sup>

Although Carlyle's ideas are often ridiculed, the need for heroes is being rediscovered. We need political heroes so that leadership in government may again be viewed as noble and valuable service. We need to view police officers and other public servants as self-

sacrificing heroes who aim to protect the public. We need to see heroism in the daily struggle of ordinary men and women. Even faithfulness and commitment within marriage and the family must again be depicted within the framework of the heroic.

Heroism can also be understood as courage in a time of suffering and adversity. Hostages are sometimes heroes. So are the sick when they inspire others by how they cope with their disease and suffering. Adults and children both need people to admire, examples to follow.

In some modern art and entertainment, then, the hero is being revived. This means that the battle against the forces of evil is being depicted in all sorts of forms and settings. Heroism as the good can emerge and show itself clearly only against the background of evil.

## II

Heroism is also a theme in the Bible, where we find some of the greatest stories in all of world literature. Who could ever forget the encounter between David and Goliath? The Bible is full of fierce conflict and stirring spectacles. Think of the great battles, and the exploits of Samson. We see thousands upon thousands of people advancing through the wilderness on their way to a new land. The walls of Jericho collapse, and entire cities go up in flames. Those who are enchanted by spectacles will not find the Bible dull reading.

Yet the hero we meet in the Bible is not David or Samson or Elijah but God Himself. In church we sing the words of Psalm 78: "Let children hear the mighty deeds which God performed of old." What were those mighty deeds, and who actually performed them — God's servants, or God Himself?

The great act of God which is fundamental to the understanding of deliverance in the Old Testament is the exodus from Egypt. The climax comes not when the Israelites are finally given permission to depart but at the Red Sea, when the Egyptians pursue the Israelites to bring them back to a life of slavery. We all know the outcome: the Israelites pass through the sea safely, but the Egyptians drown when the walls of water collapse on them. Moses and the people then sing a song of praise to the Lord:

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.  
The Lord is my strength and my song,  
and he has become my salvation;  
this is my God, and I will praise him,  
my father's God, and I will exalt him.  
The Lord is a man of war;  
the Lord is his name.  
Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea;  
and his picked officers are sunk in the Red Sea.  
The floods cover them;  
they went down into the depths like a stone.  
Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power,  
thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.  
In the greatness of thy majesty thou overthrowest thy adversaries;  
thou sendest forth thy fury, it consumes them like stubble.

(Exodus 15:1-7)

Such scenes in the Bible meet a deep spiritual need within us, the need to see the forces of evil overcome not as ignorance is dispelled but as an army is defeated in battle. There are personal forces behind much of the evil in this world. When the Bible tells us about the mighty acts of God and the struggles of His people in this world, it gives us a framework and perspective for interpreting and understanding the struggles in which *we* find ourselves involved today. In short, there is a reason behind all the depiction of evil in the Bible.

## III

Many people — not just children — are inclined to think in terms of "good guys" versus "bad guys." The Bible also seems to interpret conflicts within such a framework. Yet we must be careful not to make the mistake of identifying the Israelites as "good guys" standing opposed to the Egyptians as "bad guys." In Scripture, the line between the forces of good and the forces of evil cannot be drawn quite so simply.

The real battle in Scripture is between God (the forces of good) and His opponents (the forces of evil). The leader of the forces of evil is Satan, whose name simply means *adversary*. Whoever stands in God's way is a satan, an adversary. At one point Jesus

even found it necessary to say to *Peter*, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23; Mark 8:33).

God joins His cause to the cause of the people of Israel — provided they are faithful to the covenant. The promise comes to them in *conditional* form: "But if you hearken attentively to his voice [the voice of the angel sent before the people] and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries" (Exodus 23:22). Much later, because of the disobedience and apostasy of His people, God declares through His prophet: "But they rebelled and grieved his holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them" (Isaiah 63:10). We may not simply equate the covenant people with the "good guys" or the forces of good.

The cosmic conflict between good and evil is a major theme in the Bible. Scripture does not give us an exhaustive account of this war, but it does relate certain episodes. It also tells us what the ultimate issue is when someone like Pharaoh becomes a "satan," an adversary standing in God's path: "And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen" (Exodus 14:17—18).

#### IV

As we consider the depiction of evil, we should bear this Biblical background in mind. When people today enjoy movies and books in which the forces of good engage the forces of evil in battle and defeat them, we should not view this as evidence of decay and degeneration. There is nothing wrong with taking an interest in what appear to be (fictional or real) episodes in the cosmic battle of good against evil.

It is interesting that the literature of World War II generates considerably more interest than that of World War I. I believe there is a reason for this. In World War II we seem to see clearly delineated forces of evil opposed by forces that, conversely, are clearly good. But in World War I both sides seem to share in the blame for the death and destruction.

We are sometimes wrong, of course, in identifying certain sides

in a conflict as the forces of good or the forces of evil. My point is that we do have a tendency to view conflicts in such terms, and that this tendency is rooted in an awareness that there are battles between the forces of good and evil going on, battles in which we want to be on the side of good.

We relive those battles through our forms of entertainment. It is sometimes said that we "need" the Nazis as villains, and that if they hadn't existed we would have been forced to invent them. There is some truth to this, and therefore the contemporary preoccupation with Nazism as a manifestation of the forces of evil is not to be deplored — provided we do not equate being a Nazi with being a German.

Children are especially given to involving themselves in the dynamics of the struggle between good and evil. In their play they reenact scenes from life; their play is a form of depiction. Naturally, they throw themselves into the battle against the forces of evil. Therefore they need weapons to play with — toy guns. The desire to play with guns need not in all cases be seen as a moral or spiritual fault that needs correcting. The children want to step into the hero's role — as leaders, policemen, soldiers. They also play at being doctors and fathers and mothers.

Some children, unfortunately, take pleasure in brutality and inflicting pain. However, the pain they inflict usually has little to do with toy guns. When they wish to hurt animals and other children, they can easily find makeshift weapons capable of causing real injury — or they resort to their bare hands.

#### V

The insight that play parallels and somehow recapitulates the struggle between good and evil in this world also has implications for adult life. Some thinkers have argued that the evil impulses in man can never be fully eliminated or trusted to remain dormant. We find such thinkers especially in the ranks of those who view evil as necessary (see Chapter 5 above). These thinkers take evil very seriously and argue that it cannot be fully divorced from our impulse to do good. In other words, the "demonic" can never be fully separated from the divine or angelic.

Lionel Rubinoff, a spokesman for this point of view, writes:

What if man's capacity for evil is an essential rather than an accidental or an acquired part of his nature? What if his very capacity to love and create depends upon how he "lives through" and assimilates his primordial urge to murder and destroy? What if good and evil, rather than being opposites, are in fact dialectical partners? . . . It is the transcendence of evil which concerns us here. And I am suggesting that it is only when man learns how to celebrate in and ritualize his primordial disposition to evil that he can transcend it. To transcend evil means to have first lived through it — which is why the history of man, what we learn from it, and how we live it over again, is so vitally important to man's future salvation.

The possibility of real virtue exists only for a man who has the freedom to choose evil. It is only for the man who has first "lived through" (imaginatively or otherwise) the choice of evil that the real meaning of virtue is disclosed for the first time. But the first stage in the dialectic of human redemption through the imaginative encounter with evil is learning to refuse all illusions: whether it be the illusion of man as an angel led astray by wicked forces from afar, or the illusion of man wholly driven by demonic forces from within. Man exists at the center of a contradiction which can be resolved only by "living through," in imagination and understanding, *all* of his intrinsic possibilities. It is only, to repeat, through the imaginative transcendence of evil that the future of mankind can be secured.<sup>2</sup>

I would take issue with Rubinoff on his theoretical understanding of evil, but it seems to me that his emphasis on squarely confronting the evil impulses within ourselves is sound. Evil exists not just in the hearts of certain people we call our enemies but in the heart of every one of us. The impulse to commit acts of hatred and destruction is a factor we must all cope with.

This recognition should serve as a corrective to the tendency to think in "good guys versus bad guys" terms. Although we need the Nazis as "bad guys," we must admit that there are certain impulses within *ourselves* which could easily develop in a Nazi direction. This admission, in turn, is in effect an affirmation that the original sin committed by Adam is really *our* sin. We, too, stand condemned and could well have done the same thing in his place.

The awareness that the opposition between good and evil is within our very hearts should lead to a mature appreciation of stories and art in which the line between good and evil is not so easy to discern. We live much of our lives in moral and religious

ambiguity. Even though we delight in seeing the defeat of the Nazis reenacted in history and art and we celebrate their fall each time, we must also develop an eye for the complexities and ambiguities with which the people enmeshed in the Nazi system had to live. We must learn to recognize their sins and decisions and failures as utterly human, so that we will ultimately confess: "There, but for the grace and providence of God, go I."

The confrontation with art and historical narrative that forces us to peer into the abyss of evil threatening to swallow all humanity should teach us spiritual and moral humility. If we resist the depths of evil, it is not because evil has no hold on our hearts. Rather, we must join the psalmist in his praise of God: "He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure" (Psalm 40:2).

The ancient notion of *catharsis* thus needs a Christian interpretation. In other words, there is an overcoming of evil possible through the depiction of evil in drama, art, and history. But the victory never consists in declaring evil unreal or isolating it in such a way as to keep it at a distance. Instead the catharsis or purgation of evil takes the form of a confession of sin (including an admission of universal human sinfulness) and an acceptance of God's forgiving and sustaining grace.

## VI

The recognition of the enormous power of evil should also be our starting point when we return to the question of depicting sex. On the one hand there seems to be a need for restrictions here; unrestrained depictions of sexual acts can lead to serious problems. On the other hand, we cannot simply rule out any depiction of sex. In art and in narrative history, all sorts of sinful acts are depicted. It would seem that if the depiction of sex is somehow to be restricted, it cannot be solely on the grounds that it is sinful.

Perhaps we can better get at the question if we disregard sinful sex for the moment and pay no attention to promiscuity and sexual aberrations. Suppose we restrict ourselves to heterosexual intercourse between husband and wife. Is there anything wrong with depicting sex that takes place within the framework of marriage? Should intercourse between husband and wife be photographed and filmed?

The issue that comes up here is shame. Most husbands and wives would simply refuse to be photographed or filmed by outsiders. They would insist that their sexual relations are private, and that modesty is called for. They could even quote Augustine in their defense: ". . . no husband wants a single witness when he is rightfully doing his marital duty."<sup>3</sup> We are reminded of what we read in the Bible about the consequences of the fall into sin: "Then the eyes of both [Adam and Eve] were opened, and they knew they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons" (Genesis 3:7).

## VII

The question we must ask ourselves at this juncture is: How did the consequences of the fall into sin affect human sexuality? We might expect Augustine, as a thinker who made so much of lust and fought such an intense personal battle against sexual sin, to downplay the meaning of sex before the fall, but in fact he does no such thing. The purity of human life before the fall is not a purity achieved through sexual guardedness. In fact, Augustine is rather uninhibited in his view of sex before the fall:

Had there been no fall, there would have been none of the embarrassment I now feel in pursuing this matter further, and no need to apologize for possible offense to chaste ears. On the contrary, one could feel free to discuss every detail connected with sex without the least fear of indelicacy. There would, in fact, be no such thing as an unbecoming word and no reference to one part of the body could be any more improper than reference to the other parts.<sup>4</sup>

Augustine suggests that before the fall people had their sexual impulses and desires under control in a way that sinful man today can only imagine:

When we consider how many other human organs still obey the will even after the fall, we have no reason for doubting that the one unruly member could have done the same, so long as there was no defiance from lust. After all, we move our hands and feet to their appropriate functions whenever we choose and with no rebellion on their part. . . . Why, then, should we refuse to believe that the organs of generation, in the absence of that lust which is a just penalty imposed because of the sin of rebellion, could have obeyed men's wills as obediently as other organs do?<sup>5</sup>

Augustine seems to be pointing to sexuality as a weak spot in man. The "one unruly member" defies him and lust inflames him, sometimes without warning. How is man to keep his sexual impulses in check?

The answer seems to be twofold. First of all, there is shame and modesty connected with sex and the body after the fall. Second, the act of love becomes something to be done in private. Both these points, of course, are disputed by certain people in our time who tell us that there is no place for modesty and shame in connection with sex and who then go on to argue that sexual intercourse is just as appropriate in a party setting as in the privacy of the bedroom.

Why must sex remain private and hidden from the eyes of others? Primarily because it is capable of unleashing envy and jealousy and of stirring up feelings of insecurity. Openness in sexual practices would indeed be an incitement to lust (to use Augustine's term). When lovers seek privacy in order to make love, it is not solely because they prefer privacy but also out of deference to others: they are aware of the difficulties their love-making might lead to in the hearts and minds of other people.

The envy and insecurity of which I spoke are factors especially for adolescents, but they never fully disappear from the scene for adults either. The sight of an attractive nude or seminude body of the opposite sex is an incitement to lust for many people. And expressions of sexual affection, while not wrong in themselves, are sometimes hard for observers to cope with. Therefore we develop codes of propriety to govern such things. Lovers show themselves to each other only and display their sexual affection in private.

## VIII

We saw earlier that Augustine did not seem to think there was shame before the fall into sin. Adam and Eve only became conscious of their nakedness afterward. Does this mean that we may speak of "shameless" sex before the fall?

In answer to this question I would say simply that shame does not enter the picture. Adam and Eve could apparently walk around unclothed without any sense of immodesty. Absolute privacy during sexual intercourse would presumably not have been necessary

either: envy and lust were not lurking in the heart waiting to burst into flame.

But if "shameless" sex was all right *then*, why wouldn't it be all right *today*? I believe a text from Paul gives us the answer. Paul writes to the church in Corinth that although there is a sense in which "all things are lawful," it must be remembered that not all things are helpful and upbuilding. He elaborates as follows: "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor" (I Corinthians 10:23–24). The implication for our sexuality is clear: it may be that nudity and making love out in the open are "lawful" in principle, but they are surely not expedient. In order to avoid giving offense to others or leading them to sin, we must be modest in our dress and circumspect about our sexual displays of affection. Sexual love between husband and wife is not to be filmed or photographed to satisfy the curiosity of some third party. In this fallen world, sex seeks privacy.

## IX

This is not to say that there is no place for the depiction of sex (including sinful sex) in art and historical narratives. If art and history are truly to deal with life, sex cannot be excluded. Still, the general rule to be followed is that sex should not so much be depicted as alluded to and imagined — or in some cases symbolized. A full sex life may be part of a drama, but the sex acts themselves could well occur offstage, like the murder in *Macbeth*.

To include explicit sex within art, drama, and historical narrative is to risk lapsing into pornography. It is not necessary to argue that an entire art work is either pornographic or it is not; individual scenes and incidents within an art work can be pornographic.

The term *pornography* is not so hard to define, although it is indeed difficult to use the definition as a criterion by means of which we can always determine whether a piece of art or narrative is or is not pornography. George P. Elliott offers the following definition: "Pornography is the representation of directly or indirectly erotic acts with an intrusive vividness which offends decency without aesthetic justification."<sup>6</sup> The affront to decency must be understood as including incitement to lust and sexual wardness.

I grant that the application of such a definition is open to disagreement, but the same is true of many other standards and norms. The extent to which pornography should be suppressed or banned by *law* is a question I leave to others. Suffice it to say that there are dangers involved in the censorship of pornography, as I already indicated in Chapter 9.

## X

There yet remains the question of erotic art, which includes artistic depictions of nudes, art and literature that is sexually suggestive, and so forth. I believe it should be admitted first of all that the distinction between pornography and erotic art cannot always be clearly drawn. Still, it is important to hold out for a separate, legitimate category of erotic art.

The key to the distinction is to be found in Elliott's definition quoted above. Elliott speaks of representation or depiction "without aesthetic justification." This suggests that sexual explicitness is sometimes called for within the framework of an aesthetically worthwhile conception. Such artistic depiction might have the effect of arousing lust in some people, even though that was not the purpose. Modestly dressed women also arouse lust in some men.

It is not possible to spell out properly what erotic art is apart from a full-fledged theory of art. Since this is not the place for developing a theory of art, I will restrict myself to affirming that the human body, along with everything else in God's good creation, is a potential subject for artistic depiction.

Finally, there is the question whether there ought to be any restrictions on the viewing of erotic art. It seems to me unavoidable that there be some, however indirectly they might be implemented. There are erotic works of art that younger children probably should not view. If children can be restricted somewhat in what they see, artists will be able to develop erotic themes with less worry about the difficulties their art might cause.

No formal restrictions, however, should be necessary for adults. An adult who does not have the maturity and balance to view erotic art must impose some discipline on himself, recognizing that although all things are lawful, not all things are expedient.